

August 28, 2016
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Fearless, Shameless Table Manners

A really awkward dinner party is where Luke sets the action for this week's gospel. Really awkward, like that Thanksgiving when your cousin said something really racist and your uncle drank way too much wine. Except this awkward dinner party was even more uncomfortable and hostile.

Luke places Jesus at a number of dinner parties; eating is really a big deal in his gospel – he eats with Levi the tax collector and he's eating when the notorious woman comes in crying and washing his feet with her tears and her hair. Luke's big metaphor for the Kingdom of God is a meal: "People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the Kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29).

But this meal begins on an ominous note: Jesus is being watched closely by the Pharisees. He has recently come under their scrutiny for healing on the Sabbath – the bent over woman from last week's gospel. Here it is, another Sabbath, and Jesus is once again causing trouble, this time by challenging the etiquette of table seating at this fancy dinner.

Meals, gatherings where people are eating as the center of action makes a lot of sense. A lot of good conversation takes place over meals – both now and in the ancient world. Think of Plato's Dialogues. This is the kind of world Luke is writing for – philosophers reclining on couches making sense of the world around them. It is not so very different from a modern dinner party of cultural elites who discuss the issues of their day.

Also, we all need to eat to live, but how we eat is a social ritual. Meals are where so much of our culture plays itself out. Meals are where we live out our place in the world. All kinds of moral dramas of cruelty and kindness take place over a meal.

My North Carolina family only has a couple generations of respectability to it. The distance between a respectable poor farmer and a hillbilly was only as wide as the dinner table. Table etiquette helped make the distance wider. Some of this even got passed on to me: make tiny biscuits; big biscuits are white trash. Don't drink soda before noon; it's trashy. Though I never heard any racial epithet cross the lips of any family member in my entire life, it was apparently just fine to call certain people trash. Some people, based on what they eat and how they eat it, are garbage. My family wouldn't have been so cruel unless they were frightened, frightened of becoming garbage people themselves, of falling in the abyss where we throw losers. That they might do the wrong thing and get trashy ickiness all over them. Fear is good at making us cruel.

I thought of that fear and cruelty and I watched another mealtime drama play out in the television show, *The Wire*, several years ago. *The Wire* is a show about the Baltimore drug scene as told by the law enforcement and criminals who live in it. D'Angelo Barksdale is a high ranking lieutenant in a large drug dealing organization. And as a high ranking lieutenant in a large drug dealing organization he has a lot of money. He takes his girl, Donette out for a dinner date at a fancy restaurant. The indignities just roll in. First, the couple are placed at a small table next to the kitchen. When D'Angelo asks for a better table, the waiter tells him that the other tables are reserved for patrons who made reservations. Later he jumps when a waiter brushes the crumbs off the table. When the dessert cart comes around he pulls off a piece of

chocolate cake for Donette before he is told that the cart desserts are just for show. The scene is excruciating to watch. He is humiliated. He longs for an entrance to this world of affluence and comfort. D'Angelo had thought money could bring him into this world of good fashion, good food, and good fun. But no, he still doesn't fit in. It's obvious to him and he thinks it is obvious to everyone that he doesn't belong. The meal that he thought would show off his power and his prestige, revealed him as a weak phony. His drug dealer, ghetto background hangs over him like a neon sign.

The Wire is a story about people who are stuck, people who are trapped. Trapped in lives of crime, trapped in endless bureaucracies, trapped by their character flaws. We've all felt trapped before. But the gospel story is a story about becoming unstuck, about getting free from our traps. It's a story about liberation.

This ominous, awkward meal that Jesus attends has all the stuckness and traps of D'Angelo's meal. The culture Luke writes for is a culture of honor and shame that plays itself out at the table. There are seats at the table, some, the ones closest to the host, are seats of honor. Others, farther away from the host, are seats of shame.

What Jesus says to the guests at this party is that they sit themselves in seats of shame. After all, how embarrassing it would be if a more important guest than you arrived later (and isn't that what important guests do, arrive late?) and you were asked by your host to move to a seat of shame. And who knows? You might be asked to move up to the seat of honor. Isn't it better to have someone else point out your awesomeness than to have to do it yourself?

This bit of advice is the kind of savvy wisdom you might expect in the ancient world, a kind of life hack for the honor/shame crowd. The guests probably hoped Jesus would say

something like this – useful stuff from the local philosopher like *Seven Habits for the Highly Successful Person in the Ancient World*.

But it turns out Jesus is just building up to one of those giant reversals that Luke loves so much. The last shall be first, the first shall be last stuff that reveals the upside down world that Jesus preaches. Jesus advises the host to invite only those who have no ability to reciprocate. Instead of inviting social equals so that they can make deals or social inferiors who will then be indebted to the host, the guest list should be those who are outside of this world – the poor, the sick, in other words, the garbage people, the trash of this world.

This is ominous. In a world where who you invite brings you honor or shame, a dinner party full of the world's trash has the power to make you trash as well. That's scary. The kind of scary that turns into terror that turns into hate. These are words that can get you killed.

For us, we might be no less scared of this message. We don't want the ickiness of the world's trash on us. We don't want to feel like garbage. But we've managed to domesticate this message into a kind of social service teaching: We should help the poor, because that's a good and kind thing to do. There's nothing critically wrong with this kind of thinking, but it once again turns us into the hosts who distribute gifts in order to gain honor and avoid shame.

We have tried, again and again, to create little fortresses for ourselves, to pretend that one part of us can prosper, while the other part suffers, and that won't harm our humanity. But it's a dead end. We cannot be fully human and treat other humans like garbage.

Jesus' message is different. That great banquet, the one where Jesus says people will come from east and west, north and south, to taste the kingdom – that is the true expression of our full humanity.

At the Eucharist, we are told that we receive a foretaste of this heavenly banquet, an amuse bouche of the Kingdom of God. We model it, we practice it, by welcoming everyone to the table. This taste, this morsel, whets our appetite for the meal to come. We leave here hungry to experience more of it. And we fill ourselves by seeking out those who are not here, those who have not been welcomed, those who have been forgotten. Not because that's a nice thing to do or because we need new membership, but because it's the only way to live without fear, to live without shame. None of us, not one precious soul, is a piece of garbage.